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Montanian digital photo by David F. L.

Irish Fair gets some green

Frank Cuff, right, coordinator of Libby's Irish Fair and Music Festival, accepts a \$200 donation March from Frank Duval of Sterling Mining Co. The donation helps pay the costs of advertising and organizing the event, which is now being coordinated by a non-profit committee headed by Cuff. In years past, the event was organized by The Montanian.

Libby's fifth annual Irish Fair is this Saturday, March 11, at Veterans Memorial Gym and Asa Wood School gym. See the pull-out Irish Fair section in this issue of The Montanian for details.

Town-wide medical screening begins in April

*First-of-its-kind screening will require medical protocol to be developed
Libby*

The federal government will begin overseeing a massive, town-wide medical screening of up to 5,000 Libby residents for asbestos-related illnesses in April, according to an official of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"[The screening] is going to be headed up by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry [ATSDR] said Paul Peronard, on-scene coordinator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Libby.

"We think this is going to be encompassing about 5,000 people, which is a pretty broad screening" Peronard said. "That's a couple or three months work just collecting that information."

The government will screen residents to see if an asbestos problem exists following decades of mining and processing of asbestos-contaminated vermiculite in and near Libby. A vermiculite mine and processing plant operated from 1963 to 1990 by W R Grace & Co. which is now being sued by approximately 100 Libby

operated from 1965 to 1970 by W.R. Grace & Co., which is now being sued by approximately 100 Libby residents for alleged asbestos-related illnesses.

W.R. Grace has offered to pay \$250,000 a year for medical testing and treatment of asbestos-related illness in Libby.

"It makes sense to me that Grace bear financial responsibility for some of this testing, evaluation and medical care," Peronard said.

The medical screening of almost an entire town is unprecedented and Peronard said the procedures for such scale testing are not yet known. Subsequently, the medical protocol will be developed for the first time in "We convened in Cincinnati [in February] a meeting of medical luminaries from around the country ... from Sinai Hospital in New York ... University of Cincinnati ... and some different governing agencies specifically identification, treatment and care of asbestos-related diseases," Peronard said.

"What we tried to ... work out ... is ... a screening protocol. How we're going to test people, what kind of testing we're going to do, who we're going to make it available to. ... We wanted to get input from the smartest people we could," he said.

Even though this is a medical issue, Peronard emphasized the importance of having input and comments from Libby-area residents.

"It's important for [the people of Libby] ... outside of the medical community and outside of the government agencies ... to know how we do the screening and ... testing because there's no standard way to do this. ... going to develop the protocol here and we need public input on it."

Preliminary contact will be made by phone.

"We're actually going to phone everybody who lives in the Libby valley and ask 12 to 15 questions about their life history in terms of, did you work at the mine, do you want to participate, do you have any asbestos-related diseases ... to prioritize people to get them in for medical screening," he said.

"When the screening gets done there'll be a longer, more in-depth medical survey about complete job history and combinations of chest x-rays and pulmonary tests."

Peronard said he has begun ordering medical equipment to accommodate the huge undertaking.

"We've already started buying [x-ray and pulmonary testing] equipment to do it. ... We're lining up space at the local hospital and we're going to put in a trailer and get it outfitted. The equipment will stay locally once it's done with it."

Peronard said EPA will officially solicit public comments and input from Libby residents before the screening begins.

"There'll be a big announcement asking for public comments and input on the plan itself," he said. "To me, it's a pretty crucial element for our big-picture answer for the state of Libby and what it means to live here now." Peronard said participation is the key to success in the study.

"It's very important to us that we get people out to participate in it ... that we actually go out and find two families no matter where they are so we can identify a broad spectrum of the community ... in Libby ... through the screening."

Peronard said the screening will go a long way toward answering questions about the actual extent of asbestos-related illnesses in the area.

"I think we'll provide a good medical service back to the community. This is the start on getting some answers to the basic question: How many cases are we really talking about here in Libby? This is going to be our on-the-ground answer to that question."

Peronard said the initial screening will probably focus on former employees of W.R. Grace and their families plus people who lived near the mine or the processing plant.

"We've been trying to figure out who we actually do in this first screening and how many. Right now we're looking at former workers and their families, everybody within 2½ miles of downtown Libby, which is basically the greater Libby valley. Also anybody who has had what we're terming 'special exposure scenarios,' like being played in the piles [of vermiculite] as a kid, service workers to the mine site [including loggers] ... These are some of the preliminary questions that will be asked [in the preliminary telephone surveys]," Peronard said. Peronard said the screening would include Troy residents and could possibly include former employees of the mine who have since moved away from the area.

"A number of people moved to different areas and ... the plan isn't finalized yet, but whoever can make it back to Libby [that used to work for Grace [at the mine]] ... has an opportunity to come back and participate," Peronard said.

The screening will probably impact the medical community by uncovering illnesses unrelated to asbestos, Peronard said, and the issue should be addressed by the community now.

"When we start the medical screening and testing, we are going to generate medical cases that will demand resources on local medical care infrastructure. It won't necessarily have anything to do with asbestos."

resources on local medical care infrastructure. ... It won't necessarily have anything to do with asbestos diseases. You take 5,000 x-rays, [we're going to find] heart conditions and other medical problems and if you're going to want medical care. ... This is a big issue, not necessarily an EPA issue but a local community issue ... needs to be discussed publicly [now]."

Anybody in Libby or Troy who wants to be included in the medical screening can ask to participate, regarding their personal exposure scenario, Peronard said.

Home sampling resumed March

Second testing lab will speed-up results

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency resumed testing homes in Libby on March 6 for asbestos contamination, according to an EPA official in Libby.

"The next round of sampling in houses will start March 6," Paul Peronard, EPA's on-scene coordinator in Libby, said Feb. 24. "We'll do another round of ambient air sampling ... we've got a list of about 200 volunteers. We're in the process now of culling out two priorities; homes of former workers and homes that are close to two processing centers," he said.

One processing site was at the location of what is now Raintree Nursery on Hwy. 37 at Rainy Creek Rd. The location is in Libby near the railroad tracks and the baseball fields at what is now Millwork West.

Peronard wants to see if asbestos levels can be correlated to the physical location of homes in the area.

"The idea from that is to see if we can pick up a geographic pattern [of asbestos contamination] moving away from these processing centers," Peronard said. "We'll see if there's a relationship to high levels [of asbestos] in homes related to proximity to these different processing locations. I don't know if we are or not," he said. Peronard said EPA has hired another testing lab to help speed up the testing so results on the new round can be known sooner.

"After the Senate hearings and a few other meetings, I caught the message that folks think the pace of our analysis is slow, so I've added on another laboratory to do analysis. We've just finished a procurement for a second lab. It won't help get this first [December] batch of samples done any quicker, but the next set of houses we sample should actually turn around quicker," Peronard said. "We actually are getting better at handling these samples now."

A buck and a quarter for one moth?

By Mike McCurry, Montana State University/ Lincoln County Extension Agent

Sometimes, I need to talk things over with my dad. Ideas get clearer then. This time, the topic was weed and biological controls - usually insects - on knapweed and other noxious weeds.

I explained how *agapeta zoegana*, the sulfur knapweed moth, controls knapweed. The moth overwinters in the knapweed root, emerges as a moth in early August, and each female lays 150 to 400 eggs during its three-to nine-day adult life. The eggs hatch and the little caterpillars attack the bunch of knapweed roots. The larvae mine the outer tissues, while the older larvae mine the inner root tissue.

I had just finished an article on how to trap and transplant these insects but dad made it all clear that when you're over 80 and legally blind, capturing moths isn't an effective use of your time. I had been looking at the little picture: how to spread bio-control insects on the cheap. I missed the big picture.

Dad asked how much it costs to just buy the moths. I pulled out my only catalog and winced. A hundred cost \$125. I figured that getting people to pay a buck and a quarter for a moth would be hard.

I was wrong. I didn't see the forest for the trees. He asked about all the insects so I ran a partial list. A hundred *agapeta* moths at \$125. Five-hundred seed-head gall flies for \$30. Another 100 seed-head moths - this time *Metzneria paucipunctella* - at \$125. I finished with 100 seed-head weevils (*larinus minutus*) at \$125.

Buying a package of every knapweed bio-control insect in the catalog cost \$405. Dad turned on the light. "The same cost as a couple gallons of herbicide, I can put the bugs on the worst infestations and with the bugs, one-time cost?"

That's the bottom line. The best place to spread insects is where the weeds -- let's just talk knapweed for now -- are the thickest. If you only have a few knapweed plants on the place, most of the bugs won't find a home. If you have fence-to-fence knapweed, that bug will find a home and reproduce. If we get gentle winters and the insect